

# 2

## The Language of Art

### Learning Objectives

The following summarizes what a student should have learned from reading this chapter of *A History of Western Art*.

It is assumed that students can identify all works by title, artist (if known), culture (or nationality) and time period, medium, and style. It is also assumed that students will look up and be able to define the bolded key terms. In addition, further examples of what a student should be familiar with are listed below.

After reading Chapter 2, students should be able to do the following:

1. List and define the formal elements of art.
2. Identify the expressive qualities of line, shape, and color.
3. Make a drawing illustrating the nature of linear perspective.
4. Compare shading with shadow.
5. Describe the color wheel and the properties of color.
6. Draw the most common regular shapes and name them.
7. Explain the relationship of black and white to color.
8. Use stylistic terminology to describe an image.
9. Draw a cylinder, cube, and sphere.

### Lecture Outline

- A. Composition
  - a. The overall plan or structure of a work of art
  - b. Distinct from subject matter, content, or theme
- B. Plane
  - a. A flat surface having a direction in space
  - b. Planes can be vertical, horizontal, diagonal etc.
- C. Balance
  - a. The harmonious blending of formal elements
  - b. Simplest form of balance is symmetry
- D. Line
  - a. A path traced by a moving point that can have many qualities, i.e. aggressive, graceful, balanced, unassertive
  - b. Expressive Qualities of Line
    - i. Geometric lines can be defined formally
    - ii. Can be used to convey mood or emotional state

- c. Lines Used for Modeling
    - i. Hatching—parallel modeling lines
    - ii. Crosshatching—the intersection of two sets of hatching
    - iii. Used to make an object appear three-dimensional
- E. The Illusion of Depth
  - a. Three-dimensional drawing techniques
    - i. Use of modeling lines
    - ii. Overlap
    - iii. Placing “nearer” objects closer to the lower edge
  - b. Perspective
    - i. A mathematical system used to create the illusion of depth
    - ii. One-point perspective, simplest perspective system
    - iii. Orthogonals: “straight-angle” lines that seem to converge
    - iv. Vanishing point: the point where orthogonal lines converge
- F. Space
  - a. Demonstrating depth in two dimensional reproduction
  - b. Sculptures are sometimes shown from two viewpoints
  - c. Plans for structures illustrate where the structural parts meet the ground
  - d. Axonometric drawings are complex diagrams that represent the parts of a building as if it is turned at an oblique angle to the flat drawing surface
- G. Shape
  - a. Types of Shapes
    - i. Two-dimensional, i.e. square, circle, triangle
    - ii. Three-dimensional, i.e. cube, sphere, pyramid
    - iii. Regular geometric shapes with specific names
    - iv. Irregular or biomorphic shapes
    - v. Open or closed shapes
  - b. Expressive Qualities of Shape
    - i. Like lines, shapes can be used by artists to convey ideas and emotions
    - ii. Open shapes convey a greater sense of movement than closed shapes
- H. Light and Color
  - a. Light: an electromagnetic energy of certain wavelengths
  - b. Different light wavelengths are perceived by the human brain as different colors
  - c. Physical Properties of Color
    - i. Hue is synonymous with color
    - ii. Value is the lightness or darkness of an image
    - iii. Intensity or saturation is the brightness or dullness of a color
  - d. Expressive Qualities of Color
    - i. Warm colors—red, orange, and yellow
    - ii. Cool colors—blue or any other hue containing blue
    - iii. Symbolic significance—danger, emotions, morality
- I. Texture
  - a. The surface characteristics of an object
  - b. Actual texture, as in Oppenheim’s *Fur-Covered Cup, Saucer, and Spoon*
  - c. Simulated or implied texture, as in a painting

## J. Stylistic Terminology

- a. Representational
  - i. Naturalistic
  - ii. Realistic
  - iii. Illusionistic
- b. Representational but not especially faithful to its subject
  - i. Idealized
  - ii. Stylized
  - iii. Romanticized
- c. No relationship to observable reality
  - i. Nonrepresentational or nonfigurative
  - ii. Abstract

## Key Terms

abstract  
achromatic  
analogous hues  
asymmetrical  
axonometric  
balance  
biomorphic  
chroma  
chromatic  
color wheel  
complementary color  
composition  
content  
contour  
crosshatching  
foreshortened  
formal elements  
geometric  
hatching  
hue  
idealized  
illusionistic  
intensity  
linear  
modeling  
monochromatic  
naturalistic  
neutral  
one-point perspective  
organic

orthogonals  
picture plane  
primary color  
realistic  
rectilinear  
romanticized  
saturation  
secondary color  
shading  
stylized  
symmetry  
tertiary color, intermediate color  
texture  
three-dimensional  
value  
value scale  
vanishing point  
visible spectrum

## Arts and Artists

This is a list of all the key works in this chapter.

2.3 Alexander Calder, *Cat*, 1976.

2.12a Theo van Doesburg, Study 1 for *Composition (The Cow)*, 1916.

2.12b Theo van Doesburg, Study 2 for *Composition (The Cow)*, 1917.

2.12c Theo van Doesburg, Study 3 for *Composition (The Cow)*, 1917.

2.12d Theo van Doesburg, Study for *Composition (The Cow)*, c. 1917; dated 1916.

2.12e Theo van Doesburg, Study for *Composition (The Cow)*, c. 1917.

## Discussion Questions

1. An artist's composition consists of a variety of different formal elements. Could any of those elements be said to be more important than others? Are there any elements that are absolutely essential to a composition for it to be considered a work of art? Are there any that can generally be removed without doing violence to a composition? Is the division of art into formal elements potentially artificial? Could, for instance, color and line be one single element instead of two?

2. Human responses to shapes and lines seem (with some few exceptions) to remain largely consistent from one culture to another. Upward curves indicate a smiling face and evoke a pleasant reaction, whereas crooked lines indicate something amiss and perhaps pernicious. Babies respond to facial expressions, and our experience of shapes and lines seems to be largely hardwired. In light of that statement, is it possible for any work of art to be truly nonrepresentational, or will any combination of lines and shapes trigger a mental response to some “thing” that we “see” in the elements of the composition?
3. Art might be defined as the particular composition of certain formal elements of which art is constituted. What are the different elements? How do different elements evoke different reactions? Can art be understood by reducing it to its elements? Is the experience of art enhanced or diminished by doing so? Does art of necessity possess a quality outside of its formal elements and, if so, is that quality created by the artist or the audience or both?